

**Submission
No 128**

**INQUIRY INTO LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND
FUTURE OF THE TIMBER AND FOREST PRODUCTS
INDUSTRY**

Organisation: Valerie Farm Pty Ltd.

Date Received: 28 May 2021

TO: NSW Parliamentary Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Industry

FROM: Patanga, Valerie Farm Pty Ltd. 1033 Darkwood Road, Thora, NSW 2454

SUBJECT: Submission to New South Wales Parliamentary Inquiry into the Long-term Sustainability and Future of the Timber and Forest Products' Industry.

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we reside, the Gumbaynggir people, and pay respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

BACKGROUND: Patanga, also known as Valerie Farm Pty Ltd, is a multi-occupancy property consisting of fifteen shares and two rental properties. Forty-six people live on Patanga, including sixteen children. We are a Registered Wildlife Refuge and our members share a deep concern for the ecological integrity, sustainability and regeneration of our land, the Bellinger River Valley where we live, and the long-term ecological vitality of the planet. We are located on the pristine Die Happy Creek, from which we draw our drinking water, and are immediately downstream from the Die Happy State Forest, which is slated for timber harvesting by the Forestry Corporation within the next two years. Any industrial timber harvesting in the Die Happy State Forest has the potential to negatively impact the quality of our drinking water, the ecological sustainability of a locality that is also home to several rare and endangered species of birds, frogs and turtles, and is a region that was greatly impacted by the 2019-2020 fire season. It is a place where many of us pursue recreational activities such as bushwalking, bicycle riding, wildlife observation, photography, etc.

The rural valley here, along Darkwood Road, is home to several hundred residents - our neighbors and friends. Given the great diversity of opinions and relationships to the forest it is crucial to the social trust and harmony of the broader community that the highest science-based standards of ecological sustainability govern future forest practices, that the regulations be transparent, that a regime of very strong compliance is established, and that any who are economically displaced be offered support for equitable employment transitions. These are pressing matters as we have already experienced distrust, confusion, and strife in the valley due to inadequate ecological regulations, poor compliance regimes, and fears of loss of livelihood.

KEY CONCERNS FOR THE INQUIRY:

1. Current Failure of Compliance and Need for a Strong Compliance Regime: As is widely documented, there have been numerous cases in which timber harvesters violate basic environmental regulations. These include: illegally harvesting large, protected trees that could provide habitat hollows; failing to mark riparian habitat; illegally harvesting trees within riparian zones; piling forestry debris into stream beds; and building roads and earthworks that violate riparian protection protocols. These routine violations have led the NSW Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to levy fines and work-stoppage orders against the Forestry Corporation (FC) of NSW. Even more distressing, a great many of these violations have repeatedly occurred since the devastating 2019-2020 fire season, after which we would have hoped - at minimum - that the FC would adhere to its own regulations.

Key questions that must be addressed by any credible inquiry:

- What factors in the current regulatory, oversight, penalty, incentive, contracting and work culture regime are leading to routine failures of compliance?
- Where are compliance regimes more successful?
- Why and how are they more successful?
- How can NSW innovate and build an exemplary compliance regime, without which there will be no trust in the FC, and likely a great deal of strife around its operations?

FC operations must cease until these issues are investigated and thoroughly addressed.

2. Failure of the Forestry Corporation to Update its Own Regulations in light of the 2019-2020 Fire Season and Failure of FC to Adhere to EPA Post 2019-2020 Regulations:

The FC still operates according to regulations established long before the devastating fire season swept through 21% of Australia's forests and destroyed approximately 30% of the available timber. At a time when many forests and waterways as well as the countless species they harbor, are greatly diminished, particularly vulnerable, and even on the brink of extinction, it is imperative that any future

timber harvesting be done according to standards that adequately address this radically changed context - including the high probability that we will suffer increasingly extreme fire seasons in the coming decades due to climate change. If this cannot be done adequately in ways that ensure long-term protection and sustainability of the forests and all vulnerable species- and there is a significant probability that it cannot - then the harvesting of all NSW Native Forests should stop, with the transition to full sourcing from plantations ramped up immediately. (See below.)

We are very disappointed that the FC has regularly violated the comprehensive regulatory approach that the EPA has established in the past year. The EPA has supplemented the FC's Integrated Forestry Operations Approvals (IFOAs) with site-specific conditions that apply precautionary environmental controls to address issues related to the unprecedented scale and severity of the recent fire season on our landscapes, waterways, native plants, animals and ecosystems. The EPA's regulations are absolutely necessary for the future sustainability of our environment. We are especially distressed that the FC has walked away from negotiations with the EPA around site-specific plans for bushfire-affected forests on the NSW south coast and announced that it simply will not operate according to the EPA's rules. Again, FC operations must cease until a strong system of environmental regulations are established and enforced that can ensure long-term ecological sustainability.

3. Redirect research, funding and innovation strategies for transitioning away from timber harvesting in native forests and toward full sourcing from sustainable plantations, starting immediately.

We are encouraged that in some regards this transition is already underway and signs for significant advancement are promising. While in the late 1960's, over 75% of Australia's wood came from native forests, by 2017/18 this figure had declined to just 12%, with plantations providing the rest. During 2017/2018 Australia produced 50% more wood than it consumed in terms of total cubic meters. Relatedly, forestry employment is now disproportionately located in the plantation sector. There is now a great opportunity to capitalise on past waves of investment in plantation production and to maximise the non-wood values of native forests by finally shifting Australian wood production fully to plantations.

Several challenges remain, however: a) Plantations are often unsustainably operated, using pesticides, monocultures, and clear-fell harvesting; b) Plantations are currently largely focused on softwood production; c) far too much wood is exported as wood chips, when numerous value-added wood industries could generate greater revenue and many jobs in Australia.

A full-spectrum rapidly scaled-up plantation forestry innovation initiative can make great progress toward multispecies plantations, pesticide reduction, careful harvesting, and hardwood plantations that utilize cutting edge approaches to growth. Platforms that incentivize and support value-added wood industries can be established. Hardwood consumption can be limited to those uses for which it is genuinely needed rather than for chip and pulp exportation as is presently common.

Simultaneously the withdrawal of timber harvesting in native forests should begin from those forests that contain catchment for creek and river systems on which towns and/or farming or residential communities depend, and/or are recognised as especially important ecologically, from forests especially susceptible to crown fires, and from those areas affected by the 2019 bush fires. We do not suggest that this transition will be without complications and challenges. However, in a time of climate emergency, on the brink of a global 'sixth extinction', this vision and initiative is absolutely imperative. Moreover, the tens of millions of dollars presently spent each year to subsidise the uneconomic native forest harvesting can be immediately redeployed to jumpstart the process.

Patanga does not presently have a consensus on whether timber harvesting should be completely eliminated or just greatly reduced. These are issues and margins about which reasonable people can disagree, and the realm of 'the possible' usually shifts according to new research, technological developments, and the severity of ecological challenges - all of which are significantly unpredictable. What we do agree upon is that our communities, NSW and Australia must dedicate themselves fully to pushing the limits of the possible in ways that maximize the sustainability and regenerative capacities of our region, and our responsibility for planetary survival. Simultaneously, we must enable the economic well-being of all families and individuals- most especially those who would otherwise be negatively impacted by forestry transitions. With proper support, value-added wood industries, as well

as tourism-related jobs (which studies have shown can be a much bigger employer than forestry), and employment in fire-fighting and protection, rather than reliance on volunteers, etc. can provide alternative vocational opportunities.

The present crisis is an opportunity for shifting our practices in ways that will enhance the wellbeing of our forest ecologies, our communities, our economy, and the lives of our children's children's children. We urge the committee to conduct its inquiry with these values at the center.

Professor Romand Coles Ph.D

This submission is lodged on behalf of, and has the official support of, Patanga residents and neighbours, whose electronic signatures are shown below:

Romand Coles
Lia Haro Coles
Thomas Aickin
Beverley Fisher
Tom White
Lara Darlington
Herbert Nathan
Layo Nathan
Pauline Hooper
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Sarah Hallauer
Joie Vanrenen
Hope Ryan
Paul Ryan
Milo Ryan
Jasper Ryan
Tashi Ryan
Catriona Davies
Benn De Mole Hudson
Michael Hudson
Jenny De Mole
Bregje Aalders
Saul Thompson
Elizabeth Parish
Craig Nelson
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